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The Madness of Crowds: Recent Criticisms of Web 2.0



Editorial by Jeffrey Barlow

The theme of the Berglund Institute for the summer of 2008 was “The Wisdom and Madness of Crowds: Web 2.0”. [1] This theme offered a group of scholars, teachers, and Pacific University staff members the opportunity to reflect systematically upon “Web 2.0,” the term now widely used to denote the social, interactive part of the Web. Web 2.0 is said to embrace both business practices—such as building your content from users’ contribution—and social applications, such as YouTube, Facebook, and, most notably, Wikipedia. Our keynote speaker was Ward Cunningham, the initial developer of the Wiki software, who got the Institute off to a strong start. Ward was followed by other theorists and practitioners, who presented a variety of perspectives.

Throughout the Institute, our consensus was that Web 2.0 was a marvelous new stage in the development of the Internet, or at least a very intriguing new collection of applications. The interactive elements of Web 2.0 might realize some of the early hopes that the Web would stimulate the growth of on-line communities and democratic discourse.

I knew from works I had reviewed recently, however, that many feel that there is a much darker side to Web 2.0. In our enthusiasm for what Web 2.0 could do for us, our highly wired group of practitioners tended to brush aside such criticisms.

Here I intend to reflect upon these cautionary perspectives at more length. I remain highly positive, but I do believe that some of these cautions merit consideration. At the least, we must take care to see that these dangers do not inevitably accompany the benefits of Web 2.0.

Criticisms of the World Wide Web, of course, are not new. From the mid-1990s a number of works were very critical. These included Peter

D. Herschok's *Reinventing the Wheel: A Buddhist Response to the Information Age* (1999) [2], Ellen Rose's *User Error: Resisting Computer Culture* (2003) [3], Clifford Stoll's several works including *Silicon Snake Oil* (1995); *High-Tech Heretic: Reflections of a Computer Contrarian*, (2000); and Neil Postman's *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education* (1988) and *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1992), among many others.

These early criticisms were often thoughtful and cautionary, at other times seeming to be more contrarian attempts to cash in on the remarkable interest in the impact of the Internet by appealing to the fear of rapid unforeseeable changes. A recent spate of works extends these criticisms into the era of Web 2.0, often seeing it as the cultural juggernaut which has finally realized the worst of our initial fears of the Web. These include, Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture* [4], Lee Siegel's *Against the Machine: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob* [5], and recently, Nicholas Carr's "Is Google Making Us Stupid?: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains." [6]

Clearly, some of the principle concerns of earlier critics of the web, such as those mentioned above, have been rendered even more salient by the impact of Web 2.0. While I think that the Internet itself is still the fundamental issue, and that criticisms of authority and authorship, and other issues dealing with digital data are still central to recent critics, it seems to me that the basic characteristics of Web 2.0 and its more successful applications such as YouTube and Wikipedia are producing a much heightened concern. This concern, in the case of the works of Keen and Siegel, approaches a sort of rage against the machine, if by machine we mean computers and their interlinks.

Lee Siegel, a Senior Editor of *The New Republic* is the author of *Against the Machine*. While the work is much more of a rant than a critical analysis, some of his points are worth drawing out of the "noise" of his fulminations.

Siegel opens with the formal tropes of Internet criticism; the Internet destroys community, it creates an illusory space which ill prepares us for "the untamed, undigested, unrationalized, uncontrolled world..." [7], it destroys privacy, it has commercialized pornography and made it commonplace and less objectionable, to name only a few of his criticisms of the web.

Siegel sees two major causes of these problems. The first is the commercialization of culture. Businessmen want profits regardless of the cost to culture and have reduced all knowledge to mere information and put a price on it. They have made it possible for the uninformed and the amateur to push out the works of thoughtful professionals. Instead of *Casablanca*, we get "American Idol," the dancing babies of YouTube rather than the Greek philosopher Epictetus. [8]

The second factor responsible for what Siegel believes to be a deliberate attempt to produce a new answer to the question, "What does it mean to be human?" is the "electronic mob," the largely amateurish group who produce for YouTube, write for Wikipedia, practice Citizen Journalism or blog endlessly and self-referentially. This group is largely narcissistic above all else and wants, basically, simply to be liked. They therefore instantly grab onto whatever is popular and spread it through the culture by means, largely, of Web 2.0 applications.

With Siegel, we enter a dystopian view of Web 2.0. By empowering the electronic mob, it is destroying culture, perhaps even the possibilities of "being human." While Siegel's views are easily lampooned, he nonetheless does describe some of the worst elements of Web 2.0, although largely from an established, if not reactionary, intellectual perspective foreign to the cacophonous hurly-burly of Web 2.0. What Web 2.0 has indeed done is to empower the amateurs. It turns out that many such amateurs would rather listen to each other than to Siegel, or certainly to me. While this narcissism shows deplorable taste, at least in the latter instance, it hardly seems a crime against culture.

Another of the dystopians is Andrew Keen, author of *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture*. And "today's Internet" is, of course, Web 2.0. Like Siegel, Keen reprises many of what we might think of as "Criticisms 1.0" of the web. The Internet is anonymous, mined with questionable information, and rather than being driven by commercial values as in Siegel's view, it is in Keen's killing commerce by driving it onto the web. And, of course, it is killing books, too.

Keen is, if anything, less measured in his criticisms than is Siegel. The crimes of the Internet include, in Keen's estimation, the destruction of network television, music, advertising, newspapers, the movies, and the creation of "...an infestation of anonymous sexual predators and pedophiles." [9] In Keen's view, taken together, the Internet threatens the decline and fall of Western man.

Keen merits less discussion here because he is less thoughtful than Siegel and his 2007 book is one year older. The similarities, however, are overwhelming. Both Siegel and Keen work repeatedly the familiar tropes of Web criticism.

A far more nuanced criticism is Nicholas Carr's "Is Google Making Us Stoopid?: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains." [10] This piece will, we think, have significant influence because any criticism of the Internet published in a recognizably intellectual but mass-market journal is bound to have significant legs. "Is Google Making Us Stoopid?" will be quoted in refutation wherever the Internet is extolled. Probably it will be most often summed up as, "It's been proven that the Internet can damage your brain."

I do not find the article entirely persuasive, perhaps because I did not think all that clearly even before encountering the Internet. But the author cannot easily be dismissed. Carr has excellent credentials and has written a number of important works.

Carr writes well and draws on a number of relevant sources well worth following up on. Here we will not cite these, but simply treat all the conclusions of the article as though they are Carr's own. With this approach the article is easily summarized:

There may be a relationship between the way we read and the way we think. Reading on the web is seldom "deep reading" but more of a quick scanning, searching for information. It is possible that there is even a relationship between the way we read and our notions of self.

From this point forward, the article, like Keen and Siegel, reprises some pertinent "Criticism 1.0" charges: E-mail diffuses our attention; information is increasingly commoditized.

Also like Keen and Siegel, Carr takes a rather narrow view of culture. He summarizes at one point:

...the Net isn't the alphabet, and although it may replace the printing press, it produces something altogether different. The kind of deep reading that a sequence of printed pages promotes is valuable not just for the knowledge we acquire from the author's words but for the intellectual vibrations those words set off within our own minds. In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book, or by any other act of contemplation, for that matter, we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas. [11]

This is, as one of his sources, the playwright Richard Foreman, states a few lines below the above statement "what's at stake":

I come from a tradition of Western culture, in which the ideal (my ideal) was the complex, dense and "cathedral-like" structure of the highly educated and articulate personality—a man or woman who carried inside themselves a personally constructed and unique version of the entire heritage of the West. [But now] I see within us all (myself included) the replacement of complex inner density with

a new kind of self—evolving under the pressure of information overload and the technology of the "instantly available." [12]

Unlike Keen and Siegel however, the possible outcome of Web 2.0 in Carr's view, is not the collapse of Western man or of the loss of the possibility of being truly human, but unforeseeable sorts of changes.

And Carr, unlike Keen and Siegel, brings some comforting perspective to these possible outcomes. We have been here before, dominant forms of disseminating information, even the transition to writing itself, have always been met with alarm.

These factors discussed above may mean that, yes, our culture, or at least a small element of it, is threatened by Web 2.0. But the element of culture at stake for Carr, as for Keen and Siegel, is precisely "high culture." Part of our alarm comes from the prospect of having to join the lonely crowd, working frantically on the Internet, denied the time to reflect, to read deeply. This, however, is not a social phenomenon caused by Web 2.0 but largely by economic forces.

My own perspective is that Web 2.0 will be what we make of it. If we are not to be overwhelmed by unreliable data and video clips of dancing babies, then we must teach younger users how to recognize, and produce, authoritative data. And, as a more comforting work, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser's *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* [13], suggests, most users of Web 2.0 are able to both skim quickly, and to read deeply. They also have a better sense of the appropriate use of the web than most of us fear, though they do need proper training to become truly critical users. [14]

The best solution to the problems of the Internet, whether 1.0 or 2.0—or of the currently nascent Web 3.0, the Semantic Web [15], are, I suggest, that we all pitch in and improve the understanding of those who approach the Internet as young users. Writers like Keen and Siegel would do well to put their shoulder to the wheel rather than exclaiming

in alarm from the comfortable sidelines. After all, the babies only dance when they are watched.

Endnotes

- [1] We are processing the video from the Summer Institute now and it will be available for download in the near future. Check back in the December issue of Interface for an announcement as to its location
- [2] Reviewed in Interface at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2007/05/hershock.php>
- [3] See review at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/09/rose.php>
- [4] Also reviewed in Interface at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2007/05/hershock.php>
- [5] Reviewed at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2008/05/siegel.php>
- [6] See our review of his latest book at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2008/02/carr.php>
- [7] Siegel 17
- [8] Siegel 150
- [9] Keen 7
- [10] See the article, from the July/August 2008 issue of The Atlantic Monthly, at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>
- [11] <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>
- [12] http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/foreman05/foreman05_index.html
- [13] Reviewed at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2008/05/palfrey.php>

- [14] See the review at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2008/05/palfrey.php>
- [15] For an introduction to this topic, begin with Aaron Swartz 'The Semantic Web In Breadth' at: <http://logicerror.com/semanticWeb-long> and follow through some of its links such as the much more complex "The Semantic Web (for Web Developers)" at: <http://logicerror.com/semanticWeb-webdev>